The Moslem Naba

797 771 1. Virtually all of the inhabitants of Nobéré, Nobila, and Toècé (cantons in the present province of the Gounga Naba) are converts to Islam for reasons of personal convenience. They are the descendants of Naba Saga, twenty-second successor of Oubri.

2. The inhabitants of the villages of Doundoulma (descendants of Naba Kom, twenty-first successor of Oubri), Garpinné, and Kouila (descendants of Naba Doulgou or Roulgou, twenty-third successor of Oubri) are reputed to be devout Moslems. [211]

3. Kombissiri Naba Siguiri, circle of Ouagadougou.

4. Ramongo Naba Baongo, circle of Koudougou. Both of the above were descendants of Naba Warba nineteenth successor of Oubri, and were converted to Islam.

The present chiefs of these cantons are educated Moslems and possess mosques.

5. Sao Naba, a descendant of Naba Ouédraogo, circle of Ouagadougou, was converted nearly thirty years ago. His first teacher was a pilgrim returned from Mecca and a native of the village of Nakamtenga (near Kombissiri). He continued his study of the Koran under the direction of Sayenouné Bathily, a marabout originally from Kaédi (Mauretania) who was such a formidable thaumaturge that the local administration had to send him home in 1916. Sao Naba has a mosque, but it would appear that the Moslem religion has not diminished his animistic beliefs since he continues to make sacrifices to the manes and to drink beer from time to time (on customary feast days, for example).

6. Gourpila Naba (circle of Ouagadougou) is a former samand' biga of the present Mogho Naba and his conversion to Islam is recent, within the last six or seven years.

7. Boala Naba (circle of Ouagadougou) is a devout Moslem.

8. Gaongo Naba (circle of Ouagadougou) is also a devout Moslem. [212]

551 771 In conclusion let us point out that the present emperor continues the tradition of giving Moslem names to his children and has several of his sons in Koranic schools. There is no doubt that more of his children are being educated in these schools than in the official primary school. [213]

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pagan Mossi and the Moslem Songhoi fought several other battles until Songhoi power was broken by the Moroccans, who conquered Timbuktu in 1590. 175 797

The Moslems made no further attempt to convert the Mossi by force, but Moslem pressure did not stop; it now came in the peaceful guise of Moslem merchants and Yarsé Moslem refugees from the Mandingo cities such as Timbuktu and Djenne, who received permission from the Mossi rulers to settle in the country. However, judging from the reports of the first Europeans to reach the Mossi, the Moslems lived under many restrictions and were forbidden by the Moro Nabas to recite their prayers in public places (Tauxier 1912:585–586). Despite these restrictions, the Moslems were able to extend their influence through conversion of the cadet sons of the rulers and conversion of at least one ruler of the Ouagadougou Mossi dynasty.

About 1780 Naba Kom, the son of Zombré and a Yarsé Moslem woman, permitted the Yarsé to live in the villages and sent one of them to the Gold Coast for religious instruction. His son, Naba Sagha, was involved in a civil war and replaced some dissident pagan district chiefs with his Moslem sons. The present ruling lineage of Nobéré (where I worked) is descended from Ngado, one of these sons.[2] But although the rulers permitted their younger sons to adopt Islam, they themselves and the heirs to the thrones remained pagan in order to maintain the bonds with the ancestors. The exception to this rule was Doulougou, the grandson of Sagha, who was elected Moro Naba despite being a Moslem. Now the spread of Islam was given new impetus: Yarsé proselyting increased, mosques were built in Ouagadougou and in the villages, and many Koranic schools were founded. But with Doulougou's death the rulers reverted to paganism and Moslem influence declined. Nevertheless, the learned Moslem Imams continued to serve at court and used their knowledge of the outside world for the benefit of the rulers.

The Moslem Mossi showed the greatest hostility to the first Europeans who arrived in the country. The Imam of Yako, under the influence of his Tidjani son (who had made the pilgrimage to Mecca), refused to have any dealings with Europeans. Furthermore, he convinced the Moro Naba that death awaited any ruler who granted an audience to a European. When the French attacked the Mossi in 1896, an Imam from Béré, a former pilgrim, told the ruler to flee and not depend on his ill-equipped soldiers to defeat the gun-bearing invaders. Lamberth reported that the Moslems told the defeated and demoralized Mossi that "as soon as all the blacks become Moslems, the whites will leave" (Tauxier 1912:792).

No one knows how many Moslems were in Ouagadougou when the French arrived. Delafosse (1912, vol. 3:193) records that around the turn of the century there were about 42 Koranic schools with 230 students scattered around the country. Tauxier (1912:793), writing about the same period, states that there were 33 Koranic schools with about 358 students. No Koranic schools were reported for the Nobéré and Manga districts, but I know that there were several in the neighboring district of Béré. In 1926 there were 70 Koranic 175 797 871

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schools and 4,000 Moslems in Ouagadougou (seven percent of whom were non-Mossi). By 1944 there were about 240 schools and approximately 25,000 Moslems. The last census, 1954, did not record the number of Koranic schools but gave the figure of 60,000 Moslems in the Ouagadougou region.[3] The 4,000 Moslems of Nobéré comprise 42 percent of that district's population. With the exception of one Catholic school master and the Catholic catechist who came to the district during 1956, the population is pagan. It might be relevant to point out that Nobéré has the highest percentage of Moslems in Kombissiri, an administrative unit (a subdivision) which has 152,000 pagans, 23,000 Moslems, 3,000 Catholics, and about 100 Protestants.

As noted above, Islam first came into the Nobéré district with Ngado, who replaced a dissident pagan chief, but Ngado's lineal descendants reverted to paganism until a few years ago when the present district chief became a nominal Moslem. The cadet sons of Ngado did not revert to paganism, and today all the noble sublineages of the district are Moslem. We may note here that one of the main aspects of Islamic proselytization in this district, as elsewhere among the Mossi, has been the conversion of persons who do not hold strategic positions vis-à-vis the ancestors. The present chief is no exception to this rule, because he is only a nominal Moslem. His eldest son is the only one in the family who is not a Moslem—a status which is becoming increasingly difficult to maintain in a growing Moslem population. The chief himself became partially converted to Islam in gratitude to a Moslem Hausa trader who cured his illness. He recites the five daily prayers and observes most of the prescriptions of Islam, but he still drinks European beer, subscribes to many pagan rites and beliefs, and supervises the annual Péléga or sacrifice to the ancestors. This dual allegiance is politically expedient because the chief can function as the head of the Moslem community as well as the traditional head of all the people. He does have occasional difficulty with intolerant Moslems who wish him to become a devout Moslem, and with the traditionalists who claim that today the crops are smaller, the people sicker, and the women barren because of the neglect of the ancestors. However, with the approach of holy days, these differences are resolved in the interest of community harmony.

The chiefs of the villages under the overall command of the district chief are mainly pagan, since they are descended from the district chief replaced by Ngado. Yet they command villages inhabited by the noble Moslem sublineages of the ruling house as well as by commoner lineages. The village chief cannot become a Moslem because he too is responsible for sacrifices to the ancestors, without whose help his people would suffer. He does not take an active part in Moslem festivities, but receives the homage due a chief from the Moslems on these and other occasions. However, most village chiefs show an interest in Moslem affairs, and one of them, the chief of Vooko, built a prayer-circle (*misseri*) for Moslems who came to pay homage.

The pivotal role which the village chief plays in the exchange of wives between Moslems and pagans has led indirectly to the increase of the Moslem population. Before the French conquest he gave the Moslems more wives than

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Karême), celebrate the great festival of Ramadan and the lesser festivals, and aspire to make the pilgrimage to Mecca. Most of the Moslems can lead prayers, but only about one-tenth of their number can read and recite the Koran. However, today the masters (*karasambas*) of the 32 Koranic schools in the district are endeavoring to instruct the many boys and few girls in reading the Koran and understanding Moslem theology.

The Karême is observed by most adult Moslems in the community with the exception of invalids and working men. Moslems say that the fast is intended to turn the minds of the people to God, and they distinguish between the Moslems "of the mouth" who break the fast and those "of the heart" who fast until Ramadan. The crescent moon of Ramadan is greeted with guns and general rejoicing and the following morning the Moslems gather at the tomb of Ngado to give praises to God; during the rest of the day they pay homage to the chief and visit their friends. However, a change in the traditional observance of Ramadan is expected, because one of the Moslem leaders objects to the ceremony at the tomb of Ngado. He feels that some Moslems are beginning to regard the tomb of the first Moslem as an earth shrine or Tengkougre.

So far, only five of the more prominent Moslems in the district have made or are making the pilgrimage to Mecca. The first man made the voyage about seven years ago, and is now conducting a Koranic school in a neighboring district. His brother went to Mecca about two years ago and is now the senior *El Hadj* in the district. Of the two men who were on the pilgrimage when I arrived in the district, one has since died near the Red Sea and the other is still away. One other man left for Mecca and returned to the district during my stay. Most of the pilgrims now fly to Mecca; only two men followed the traditional route through Ghana, Kano, Lake Chad, the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan (now Sudan), and on to Mecca. In general, all pilgrims have used their own resources for the trip, but they receive some help from their lineage brothers and from the other Moslems in the district and in Ouagadougou.

The pilgrimage to Mecca represents the greatest event in the lives of the district Moslems. When the last pilgrim left, a great crowd gathered at his house and prayed for his safe journey, and some even accompanied him to Ouagadougou and remained there until he left. The Moslems and many pagans of the district, under the command of the district chief, cultivated his fields during his absence. And when the new El Hadj returned, a large crowd accompanied him to his house with shouts of joy. There he killed a sheep in thanksgiving, sprinkled the crowd with holy water from Mecca, and recounted his experiences. His listeners were impressed by his airplane flight and the description of Mecca, but they showed the greatest interest when he said that Mecca women covered their faces and that most Meccan men were monogamous. The local Moslems smiled when they heard this bit of news from one of their members, but I have seen them scowl when discussing the monogamous practice desired by the Christians.

The attitudes of Moslems differ very little from those of the other Mossi as regards children and polygyny. They say that they do not believe in the

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how important is the conversion of the chiefs, or, at least, their sympathy for our religion, in the spread of Catholicism." The missionaries may have been successful in the village of the Manga district chief because he was sympathetic to them, but they made few converts in the villages far from the district center or in the neighboring districts. In the Béré district, a few miles from Manga, the Catholics have made only 22 converts despite more than 15 years' work. In Manga, however, they were able to "recruit" most of the young children for their church and school. When an old man was asked why his children became Catholic, he tried to evade the question but finally replied that he did not control the minds of his children. Knowing the nature of administrative practice in the upper Volta before 1946, and the nature of Mossi family structure, we looked further for the answer.

Paradoxically, it comes from a Catholic missionary, André Dupont, who, seeking to discover the reason for the decrease of patients in the Catholic-controlled maternity clinics, asked:

> Why have the maternity clinics which in 1942 served more than seventy mothers a month now serve only two or three? "We are no longer forced to go," reply the villagers. Was it the fear of sanction which accounted for the unanimous use of the clinics? Alas! It would seem to be so. The use of force and sanction have rendered odious an institution of charity. It would have been better if the mothers were only encouraged to use the clinics. "These natives do not understand," I am told sometimes. But how does one expect them to understand? (Dupont 1949:4)

Fear was certainly one of the reasons why the people in Manga embraced Catholicism. Before 1946 (the Brazzaville conference in 1944 abolished forced labor), men and women were recruited for work on the roads and on Ivory Coast plantations, and children were recruited for the schools. The district chiefs often gathered orphans and the children of their former serfs and sent them to the mission to fill the quotas, but many children and whole families voluntarily attached themselves to the missions. The reasons for so doing are legion, but in some cases it was simply the desire to accept the new religious faith.

Once at the mission the children were taught French and the tenets of Catholicism. Many of the boys later became catechists or priests and several girls went into the nunnery. However, the largest group of educated youths became the clerical personnel of the administration and were lost to missionary activity. Because the administration lacked French-speaking Mossi, the young people received good jobs. This desertion to the administration has become so serious that the missionaries at Manga have ceased to teach French to their catechists and now use the vernacular.

Conversion to Catholicism, bringing with it the knowledge of French, was formerly one of the sure roads to upward social mobility. Most Catholic teachers at Manga (and at Nobéré) are individuals who were recruited as unwilling school-boys but today are the highest paid members of their lineages. Other gains have accrued to persons who become Catholics. For example, the people at Manga believe that the missionaries used their influence with the

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don Christianity when told by shamans that to do so is necessary in order to have children. Unfortunately, the panoply of saints in modern French Catholicism does not seem to be able to syncretize with or displace the local deities, and thus come to the aid of the Mossi. This weakness of modern Catholicism in West Africa appears to make it unable to deal with many of the insecurities which arise in the daily lives of its adherents.

The American Protestant missionaries were never able to establish stations in either Manga or Nobéré because of the relative strengths of Catholicism and Islam in these two districts. However, they do have stations in Po and Koubri, 30 and 50 miles away. The 1954 census lists five Protestants in Manga, but I could find only one family head who had been a Protestant and that during the period when he worked for missionaries. It is interesting to note that when he returned to his native Manga he did not become a Catholic but embraced Islam instead. Although Protestants among the Mossi are trying very hard, they are working under three handicaps: (1) the opposition of the local administration, (2) their own explicit cultural bias, and (3) the puritanical nature of their brand of American Midwestern Protestantism.

The first Protestant missionaries to arrive in 1926 reported: "There has often been opposition to the preaching of the Gospel in the district, and there is a continual under-current which has hindered many from accepting Christ" (Assemblies of God Mission 1934:14). Americans who wished to train the young Mossi to read and write found official opposition to the use of the vernacular for such purposes, and were obliged to receive French teaching certificates. When one recognizes that in those days less than one-tenth of one percent of the Mossi children were in schools (today the number is just over three percent) one cannot help feeling that any kind of education would have been useful to the Mossi. During the war the Pétain-oriented administration restricted the movements of the Americans and frightened off their converts. And finally, the Americans come under the general disapprobation with which the Mossi view most Europeans.

American Protestants are fairly well insulated from the Mossi population, and have only now begun to show any interest in Mossi culture and problems. Geoffrey Gorer, who visited the Mossi in 1935, wrote:

> There were some American missionaries in this village, a whole family living in a house filled with texts; I do not know what creed they preached, or with what success; they looked more like American missionaries than I had thought anyone could have done off the films . . . they spoke with a dispassionate "none of our business" disapproval of the ill treatment of the negroes, who they said were ruled entirely by fear (1935:149).

Many of the Protestant missionaries who are now working with the Mossi are still inclined to agree with the first missionaries' ethnocentric judgement of their customs:

> Moral standards are very low. Nothing is wrong until it is found out. Chastity is unknown . . . we questioned in vain many natives in search of a suitable Mossi word for "virgin." They all declared there was no such word in their language. . . . Many

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would remain entirely secular in nature. The Imam at Nobéré is positive that now the White Fathers do not have "force" behind them, no conversions will be made in the district. He said that the Moslems here do not rely on force to convert the pagans, and leave them alone if they resist persuasion to embrace Islam.

Mossi politicians who, for the most part, were trained by the Catholics and are still supported by the church, are careful not to offend their pagan and Moslem constituents. One internationally-known Mossi politician told a Nobéré audience that he had a Moslem name in addition to his Catholic name, and that he even attended a Koranic school. Although this admission did not help him gain the votes of the Moslems, he carried the district because he was supported by the chief and received the votes of the pagans. The politicians are now under pressure from the people to expand the system of public schools so that the road to social mobility, through education, would be open to pagans and Moslems as well as Catholics. Even in Manga, where the government-supported parochial school is adequate for the school population, there are plans to build a public school. The special prerogative of the mission schools to use noncertificated personnel on their teaching staffs is now being attacked by teachers who themselves were trained in these schools. These teachers are demanding that the government either cease paying salaries to the unqualified teachers in the mission schools or else employ similar persons in the public schools. Thus one of the most important channels through which the Catholics obtained converts is being consciously narrowed.

CONCLUSION

The spread of Islam in Africa south of the Sahara is one of the significant cultural events in this area. Islam is not only spreading at the expense of the indigenous religious systems, but is taking precedence over Christianity brought to Africa by the conquering Europeans. The reasons cited for the success of Islam over Christianity are legion. They include: the adaptability of Islam in contrast to the rigidity of Christianity (Greenberg 1946:70; Goilly 1952:173; Marty 1917:283); the simplicity of Islamic doctrines, as opposed to the complexity of Christianity (Delafosse 1931:236; Quellien 1910:38–39); and the "imponderable factors" brought about by European conquest (Goilly 1952:261–266).

In this paper I have shown that Islam has made greater progress than has Christianity among the Mossi because:

(1) Christianity has a negative appeal to the Mossi because it was brought by their conquerors. For the proud Mossi, Christianity is intimately linked with their first real invasion, defeat, and occupation by aliens in their long history. In contrast, Islam has penetrated the country by peaceful means after its initial failure at proselytization by means of the jihad.

(2) In the early period of this century, the European administration recruited Mossi men and women for forced labor at home and in the Ivory Coast, and recruited children for the mission schools. But as soon as forced